

# Widening the Table: Hybrid Support Groups in Conflict Mediation

Emma Leslie



Over the past few decades, the shifting dynamics of the nature of war, combined with a maturing field of peace process support, have led to parallel shifts in the nature of mediation in peace processes. There has been [a significant increase in the number of ongoing civil wars](#), as opposed to interstate wars, and the field of conflict transformation has changed accordingly. Under the leadership of Kofi Annan, the United Nations began the process of mainstreaming the inclusion of civil society and other actors into the fields of peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Now, more actors, using more-advanced support mechanisms, are engaging in peace-process support. This maturing of the field has also helped facilitate innovative approaches to overcoming the challenges of contemporary peace talks in a civil war setting. This article will reflect on some of the changes in practice in relation to the peace process currently underway in the Philippines.

Traditional diplomatic mediation occurs between two states with a third-party “big man” mediator, normally a state or an international organization. The process is usually based upon the assumption that those involved in the conflict operate according to defined hierarchies of power, and thus that the way to manage the conflict is to identify and work with the relevant power-holding authorities within those hierarchies. Another key feature of traditional mediation practice is that the conflict is perceived as a breakdown in the predominantly pacific political relations of states. Viewing conflict in this way, traditional mediation practice approaches the conflict through deployment of a mediator who aims to bring conflicting parties to a compromise that would restore the status quo before the conflict, [thereby restoring the relationship to its "normal" state of affairs](#). This has led to mediation being limited to a select group of state actors engaging in a process where discussions and outcomes are circumscribed.

In intrastate conflict mediation, we must move past the narrow traditional approach. There is a need for mediation efforts to refocus on the challenges unique to specific conflicts and to incorporate a wider array of actors that strive to address the deeper, root causes of the conflicts, rather than return to the status quo ante. In other words, mediation in the internal conflicts we see today requires a more extensive effort that mirrors the more far-reaching causes and effects of these conflicts.

## Shifting Roles in Philippines Mediation

The idea of a single mediator has become complicated in recent years, with the advent of social

media and the increased presence of nonstate actors in peace talks. This complication extends to the concept of multitrack diplomacy, permitting more fluid behavior and allowing actors to move beyond their own “tracks” to play a wider array of roles. Now, Facebook and Twitter are employed throughout peace talks to expand outreach for support and to express and shift opinions surrounding the process. With this increased accessibility of peace processes, it is hard to determine who is actually at the table and who is not.

In the case of the peace process between the government of the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), for example, both sides use their respective websites and social media outlets to share information about the process and express opinions. There has also been an increase in the inclusion of nonstate actors, including international nongovernmental organizations, in the mediation process. Almost all peace processes now involve some form of international mediation support structure, including contact groups, friends groups and, in one of the most recent innovations in peace process support, the hybrid international contact group.

The International Contact Group (ICG) involved in the formal peace talks between the government of the Philippines and the MILF is the first hybrid international mediation support group and includes both states and international NGOs. Created in 2009, it initially combined four governments—the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Japan—and four NGOs: the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Geneva-based organization specializing in conflict mediation; Mohammadiyah, Indonesia's largest Muslim people's movement working on health and education; Conciliation Resources, a London-based peacebuilding organization; and The Asia Foundation, a development organization with reach throughout the Asia region. However, the group membership has changed with the progression of the peace talks. The current shift in focus from negotiating the agreements to their actual implementation has meant The Asia Foundation's support role [has evolved with this shift](#) to join the Third Party Monitoring Team. They have been replaced on the ICG by the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Rome-based Christian association.

The ICG members come together to support the facilitation effort led by Malaysia, the convener of the peace talks since 2001. Malaysia's role in the peace process has strengthened over the years as the country has gradually earned the trust of both parties;[it is now perceived as an honest broker](#). Its role [was described by one observer as](#) “the one constant in the ups and downs, highs and lows, and rise and fall of that peace process.” Initially a facilitator, Malaysia has also taken on tasks as a mediator and negotiator, with these three roles becoming increasingly interchangeable. The example of Malaysia's facilitation and The Asia Foundation's transforming support demonstrates the increasing fluidity of roles in peace talks.

Under a traditional international approach, international involvement in mediation between the government of the Philippines and the MILF would be limited to Malaysia working alone as facilitator, but the creation of the ICG demonstrates the increasing role of international NGOs in mediation support and the value of adopting a more holistic approach to mediation that fosters deeper levels of engagement. The creation of the ICG in the Philippines is part of a larger reframing of how to engage with present-day conflicts. These qualities make evaluating the role this mechanism plays and the advantages it provides worthwhile.

The role of the ICG as outlined in the framework agreement between the Philippines and the MILF that created the body is as follows:

1. To attend and observe the face-to-face negotiations upon invitation by the parties with the concurrence of the facilitator;
2. To conduct visits, exchange views, and give advice on a discreet basis in coordination with the parties and the facilitator;
3. To seek out the assistance of recognized experts, resource persons or groups on specific issues in order to support the parties; and
4. To meet upon request by any of the parties at various levels [to help resolve substantive issues](#) based on agreed agenda.

In practice, this has meant that ICG members would meet before negotiations to share information and expectations. During negotiations, members would quietly observe, but if requested by the parties or the facilitator, they would comment on an issue or produce draft documents for the discussion. If talks reached an impasse, the ICG would meet with the facilitator and shuttle between both parties to identify common ground or other solutions for breaking the deadlock. The two negotiating parties would also brief the ICG separately after each round of talks. This has [assisted in assessing developments](#) and identifying areas where ICG members can help prepare for the next round of talks.

The ICG was most active in-between rounds of the peace talks. State ICG members often met with Filipino state officials in Manila and Mindanao, both to listen to their concerns and suggestions and to exert diplomatic leverage in favor of the peace talks. The United Kingdom and Japan also increased development and humanitarian funding to Mindanao. Between negotiations, international NGOs participated in capacity-building programs with local civil society, encouraged cross-community dialogue, provided technical and financial support to local NGOs and invited external experts to share lessons from other peace processes with local civil society organizations as well as the peace panels.

The activities of these countries [were guided largely by their areas of expertise](#). For instance, Japan focused on funding infrastructure projects, while the United Kingdom was able to share lessons learned from the Northern Ireland peace process. Likewise, the NGOs contributed according to their areas of specialty, with Conciliation Resources analyzing draft documents from the peace panels and providing discussion papers on transition, normalization and devolution of policing; the Asia Foundation focusing on ways to strengthen governance; the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue bringing in high-profile “eminent persons” to discuss topics such as power-sharing and wealth-sharing; and Muhammadiyah bringing its experience as a provider of health and education services in Indonesia.

This is an example of mediation support, in which contact group members provide specific technical expertise, break deadlocks when they arise and perform “translation work” as misunderstandings arise, as opposed to traditional mediation. Although not always seen as the preferred method of assistance by donors and international organizations, mediation support is often essential to the

mediation process.

The roles played by ICG members both during and between peace talks are much in line with the approach advocated by J.P. Lederach of "[mediating spaces rather than people](#)." The ICG serves as a collaborative mechanism that bypasses the idea of a single central mediator who "runs the talks and has all the answers." Instead, this approach means that a group of engaged actors with full access to the process [are able to](#) "weave a web of support around the peace talks both in session and in between." Being able to engage with more actors and build more relationships in more numerous areas of cooperation means the ICG is not just part of the mediation process during the talks, but also a trusted support mechanism later down the line or between talks, allowing for deeper and longer-term engagement.

An approach to mediation that includes both states and international NGOs allows for a more holistic engagement, since states and international NGOs have differing but complementary roles to play. This is significant because states and international NGOs are able to reach out to various stakeholders and actors in the peace process in order to undertake different tasks. Whom they reach out to and how is dependent on their background, their networks, their professional expertise and the rules they must observe, either in an official state capacity or as a member of an NGO. While NGOs can hold talks with proscribed groups, only official representatives of the state can get meetings with other state actors or political figures. In this way, while governmental and nongovernmental participants in the mediation might not be effective acting on their own, they can extend their influence by coordinating efforts. Such a partnership requires among other things confidentiality since, given the ongoing internal conflict, some of the parties to negotiations will be classed as illegal. The use of a network to properly engage with these groups and feed information from them to the wider peace process is a key element of the work a conflict resolution mechanism like this performs.

This dual approach also [facilitates greater insight](#) into the two wider communities in which official and nongovernmental actors work, with "diplomats obtaining a better understanding of the work of civil society and vice versa, thus creating increased understanding, appreciation and collaboration between actors." International NGOs are able to feed information from the local level up to the representatives at peace talks, and to share with local stakeholders what is happening at the previously opaque leadership and diplomatic level. This allows communities affected by the conflict to feel more connected to the process, thus making the process more inclusive. Civil society engagement fosters confidence in the process at the grassroots level, which is essential for the creation of a sustainable peace in the long term.

As a result, the hybrid model is better equipped than the traditional model to identify challenges that arise, as the combined group of state and civil society actors will enjoy closer relationships with more actors than a single mediator would. When challenges do arise, the group is also better equipped to find solutions and provide support, given that it has a wider range of expertise than an individual could provide.

This innovative approach arose from a common challenge encountered in peace negotiations: The government and armed group each want different actors around the table. In the case of the Philippines, the government was reluctant to give other states and multilateral organizations

oversight of its internal affairs, while the nonstate armed group sought to balance the asymmetric power distribution by engaging with multiple and influential actors. The ICG is a mechanism that balances these opposing positions, and it grew organically as a response to the difficulties encountered in successive negotiations by the conflict parties.

### **Armed Groups as Peace Resources**

To allow for homegrown solutions to problems faced in peace talks, conflicting parties need to be encouraged to drive the thinking on the nature of the talks themselves. Yet another shift that helps facilitate this kind innovative thinking is that armed groups are increasingly becoming resources for one another regarding peace talks, with greater exchanges among such groups allowing them to share their experiences and lessons learned from their respective peace processes. The case of the Philippines again provides a good example of this.

In January 2012, the MILF leadership met with the Karen National Union (KNU) of Myanmar to share its experience of maintaining cease-fires throughout talks. This was the first such meeting between these groups, and the chairman of the MILF Peace Panel, Mohagher Iqbal, chose his advice to the KNU carefully. First, he said, “Prepare, prepare, prepare. And when you think you are ready, prepare some more.” He explained that armed groups have been well-trained to fight in the jungle, but negotiations are a different arena, requiring training, preparation, knowledge, awareness, tact, strategy and skill. He added, however, that there is always some aspect of negotiation that has not been considered ahead of time, making it necessary to remain aware and to be prepared to deal with whatever that may be.

Second, Iqbal advised, maintain military discipline, which is not just for fighting wars. When signing a cease-fire agreement, discipline is essential to ensure that the chain of command is intact. A cease-fire does not mean disarmament, but instead a cessation of hostilities so talks can go on. Those negotiating need to know that they can deliver on their promises, that is, that if their troops are ordered to disarm and demobilize, they will. Taking part in peace talks with this knowledge allows the leadership to negotiate in confidence that they can deliver on agreements made.

Third, negotiating within your own group is even harder than negotiating with your opponent. Uniting and bringing your group along with the negotiation is the most challenging aspect of peace talks.

Since this meeting, the KNU’s general secretary and commander in chief have remarked numerous times that despite all the international expertise assembled in the peace trainings they have attended since the commencement of the Myanmar peace process in 2012, it was Iqbal’s words, as a trained soldier and seasoned negotiator, that have resonated most throughout the process.

Having faced the horrors of war, armed groups can provide a different and powerful perspective on the path to peace outside fixed ways of viewing conflict and its resolution. Since meeting with the KNU in 2012, MILF leaders have met with several more groups in Myanmar, including the 88 Generation democracy leaders.

### **A Dynamic Process**

These two examples, of the ICG and experience-sharing among armed groups, demonstrate the value of internally driven, innovative approaches that move past the old paradigms of traditional diplomatic mediation. The examples highlight the need to reassess and re-evaluate the frameworks, paradigms and tools that have long been taken for granted as fundamentals of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, in order to develop new, better means of finding solutions to the challenges faced during these complex peace processes.

There is a valuable role for external and internal partners to play in supporting peace processes by creating open environments that foster creative thinking, listening and implementation of approaches endorsed by those on the ground, and that allow for initiatives to grow and adapt to local conflict dynamics. This necessitates in-depth analysis and the constant reframing of approaches, according to what is happening on the ground.

Increasingly, international mediation is being implemented in civil war settings. It is within these settings that a wider variety of actors are being included around the negotiation tables, and a wider variety of concerns are being considered in order to address the root causes of conflict as opposed to returning to the status quo ante. This more comprehensive approach of peace-process support with states, international NGOs, domestic NGOs and even other armed groups providing advice, alternative views and experience is extremely valuable to the maintenance of peace negotiations. This is the case not only in the practical first layer of the ICG's support in breaking deadlocks and helping the talks run smoothly, but also in the second layer of inspiration and support for the creation of mechanisms that are tailored to the individual characteristics of conflict dynamics.

This shifting of perspective and the changing of practice according to setting may in fact be what peacebuilding is all about. It encourages creativity, innovative ideas, new possibilities and novel thought patterns. It takes thinking beyond the confines of old paradigms envisioning a process in which party A and party B fight, cease fire, bring in a mediator, negotiate, sign peace, give up arms and go home.

Conflict is not static, and the means of addressing it should not be either.

Progress is the principle at the heart of mediation—it is what the outcome of peace negotiations should be, but it should also be at the heart of what is practiced during negotiations. Peace workers should continually reflect, innovate and change in order to find improved and more-advanced ways of practicing the act of supporting progress in peace negotiations. The ICG approach in the Philippines is one example of how this approach might bear fruit.

*Emma Leslie is the director of the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Siem Reap, Cambodia, whose mission is to promote research and action to strengthen strategic intervention into armed conflict in Asia. Emma also acts as a representative for Conciliation Resources in their support role in the Mindanao peace process.*

*Photo: A Moro rebel at a MILF outpost in the southern Philippines (Photo by Wikimedia user Mark Navales, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Generic 2.0).*

